Making large scale events more effective: A facilitator's reflections on the Acacia Research and Learning Forum (ARLF)

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Background

On January 27, 2009, I received the following email from a member of IDRC's Acacia team:

"I'm writing you because I am involved with the Acacia partners' conference, which will take place in Dakar (October 2009). I wanted to get that list of questions we should be asking ourselves when thinking about doing a conference like this. I seem to recall you have a list of questions you ask people. If you have something like this, it would be really helpful if you could send them to me.

Also, are you interested in being involved in helping us think through the Acacia conference? We are having a meeting about this later in the week, so I haven't proposed anything yet. I wanted to touch base with you first to see a) if you are interested and b) if you have the time."

This email initiated a challenging but rewarding nine-month planning process that led to the convening of 150+ Acacia partners in Dakar, Senegal from October 4 – 9, 2009.

This document tells some of the story behind the scenes. It is a reflection on what happened from a process perspective and is structured in a way that I hope it serves as a resource for those curious in making their group gatherings – whether they are meetings, workshops, events etc. – more effective and meaningful.

Rationale

Some may find it surprising that a google search on "boring meetings" will generate more than 5 million hits. Those who regularly participate in ineffective meetings may be surprise that there aren't more. Either way, it begs the question "why is it that meetings are so boring?"

According to the BBC, many organisations wouldn't consider a presentation to be proper unless there are slides[1]. Unfortunately for most, the skills required to effectively present in front of an audience, with or without slides, don't come naturally but are developed

[1] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3993483.stm

because of an awareness and with experience. Most presenters, if not all, fall into one of the traps of highly ineffective speakers by:

- Relying heavily on their slides to communicate their message
- Using a conversation voice
- Umming and erring instead of pausing
- Avoiding eye contact
- Telling bad jokes
- Lacking enthusiasm

Even if an event's planning team could identify highly effective speakers to address the content under consideration, 3 days of endless presentations is exhausting and provides limited value those on the receiving end. There are better ways to convene and luckily people are waking up to them.

In the case of the Acacia Research and Learning Forum (ARLF), it was decided in the initial stages of the planning process, that the forum would be a place where:

- Everyone is able to discuss and express opinions in a safe environment.
- Partners will be able to shape new ideas for project networks.
- Everybody will have opportunities to contribute.
- Participants feel like part of something meaningful, new and exciting.
- With innovative structure (content and physical space) and processes.
- Place where innovation is discussed in the field of information and communication, and a place where everyone can learn.
- Participants have access to quality information/data.

It was clear that PowerPoint presentations, no matter how well they would have been delivered, wouldn't create the kind of place envisioned. Approaches that could bring the interesting conversations and real work that often gets done in conventional meetings during the coffee breaks, lunch and socials, into the meeting room needed to be considered.

Event Design

This section highlights two aspects of an event's planning process – articulating objectives and developing the agenda. The ARLF experience is used to illustrate possible outcomes for the stages.

Articulating objectives: Ask powerful questions

Years ago, I connected with Toke Moeller of InterChange to pick his brain on ways to help groups better articulate their objectives in designing group gatherings[2]. He proposed

[2] From 2001 – 2008, I worked as a Senior Program Officer with the Bellanet International Secretariat (housed within IDRC) supporting collaboration in the international development community especially through the use of ICTs. These were formidable years in that my colleagues and I were at the forefront of experimenting with and learning from methods and tools in support of collaboration. Much of my current thinking and expertise has been shaped by these experiences.

what I thought were a powerful set of questions which I have used to this day when I first meet with a team to plan an event:

1. What is the felt need for the event?
2. What do you expect this event to become? TIP: It is useful to ask groups to respond with "A place where...")
3. What is being offered to those who take part?
4. Who are the 'right' people to take part?
5. Who is involved in the planning process? What skills and capacities do they bring? What's missing and how will they be sourced? How will these people work together?
6. How do you see the event unfold? TIP: Focus on the macro level not on the specifics

Having worked with dozens of event planning teams[3], I have found that the process of working through these questions is as critical as the responses that they generate. The questions help surface differences in perceived needs and expected outcomes – an important step for building consensus.

This process for some planning teams can take anywhere from a couple of hours to two days. Many can only tackle them at intervals, which can work by spreading the process out over weeks.

Whatever the approach, a few tips are offered at this stage of the planning process:
- Invest in a face-to-face discussion especially if the group hasn't yet worked together
- Draft a meeting agenda and develop a design that incorporates a variety of methods i.e. independent thinking, working in pairs etc.
- Use facilitation techniques such as summarizing and paraphrasing to increase understanding and probing to get at deeper insights and meaning
- Use visuals preferably on large flipchart paper to create group memory
- Following the discussion, draft and distribute the notes immediately. Only minor tweaking should be required if you want to share them with participants.

Developing an agenda

Establishing principles: While working through the set of planning questions, the spirit of the event should become clear and could be articulated in a set of design principles. In the case of the ARLF, the following a set of principles emerged though weren't made explicit until the event itself:
- Everyone has something to offer
- Connections make a difference
- Movement is good

[3] Since 2000, I have been fortunate to work with a variety of, mostly geographically dispersed, teams in the design and implementation of events such as workshops, consultations, learning forums etc. in more than 25 countries around the world.

- We all have a stake in making this a success

Agreeing on the spirit and principles is a useful step as it allows the group to assess the appropriateness of approaches. For example, from the outset, one Acacia team member felt that the first day should unfold as a series of panel presentations. Discussing the approach in the context of the principles helped the individual understand why other formats should be considered.

A non-linear approach: Also emerging from the first stage of the planning process is a shared understanding of the event's objectives. These feed into the development of the agenda's design, which could be approached by objective once the expected outputs and outcomes are established and/or session-by-session.

In the case of the ARLF, it was decided that each day would focus on one of the objectives. It was useful to have identified the following before delving into the sessions' design facilitated the process:

- Clear overall objectives and macro level topics to be addressed during the forum i.e. showcasing partners' work, exploring issues and ideas related to networked societies
- Two team members who would work closely with the facilitator to initiate thinking on sub-objectives

Designing sessions

As discussed later in this report, most of the methods used during the forum were not new but rather tried and true. Refer to the KS toolkit for a complete list of methods[4].

Once the purpose for the sessions were defined and agreed to by the team, individuals were assigned to take on a lead role by working with the facilitator to detail the process. Many of the sessions were not designed in one sitting but rather evolved with time over a series of sometimes lengthy brainstorming sessions

The amount of time and energy required designing each session varied and seemed to depend on the following:

- The team's knowledge of the method. Previous exposure reduced the amount of time required to design the session.
- Level of involvement of participants as session 'presenters'. As their involvement increased so did the amount of time spent supporting ongoing communications, developing session documentation and arranging logistics.
- The originality of the method. Customized methods required significant process thinking to be adopted and adapted to meet the session objectives.

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[4] The KS Toolkit is a useful reference providing information related to knowledge sharing tools and methods such as descriptions, histories, when to use, how to use, tips etc. ICT4D's ENRAP III project (supported by PAN Asia and the Asia Division of IFAD) is currently supporting the development of a KS Curriculum. The curriculum builds on the work of the toolkit by providing process documentation for two types of users – KS facilitators who want to deliver a KS workshop or individuals wanting to simply introduce a tool and/or method during a group gathering. For more information, contact Allison at ahewlitt@gmail.com or skala@idrc.ca.

Reflections on event design

There were a number of factors that positively contributed to the development of the agenda. These included:

- ***Ownership in the agenda by the team as well as the facilitator:*** Every member of the team responsibility for at least one session - if not event logistics. This approach was more time consuming, as it required ongoing and iterative virtual communications at two levels – between the session lead and myself as well as within the team.
- ***Team approach:*** It was helpful that the planning team had a history of working together especially virtually as we were spread out across 4 countries and 3 time zones. Establishing at the outset that the team would support each other's efforts and not challenge them seemed to be an important step as was the identification of forum teams (logistics, communications, content and agenda, online documentation and coordination) and their corresponding ToRs.
- ***A participant driven agenda:*** Selecting open space as the method for day 3 meant that participant interests and needs drove the day. Responses to a survey sent to participants months prior to the event allowed us to develop a more responsive agenda – at least in terms of content – while also working to meet the needs of the Acacia team. While we could have invested more efforts to engage participants prior to the event, the value of doing so remains questionable.

Event Implementation

This section provides an overview of the methods and tools used to support the forum offering tips to those interested in putting the processes into practice. It also offers a few recommendations when challenged to work in a bilingual or multilingual environment.

Methods

The methods used during the forum were not new. Some, like the open space, have communities of 500+ practitioners around them with rich resources that can be tapped. Others may be lesser known but have been used in at least the past decade, if not much longer, to support groups to their best thinking.

Most of the methods listed below can be used in isolation – in other words, they can be the sole method used in a meeting or as was the case with the forum, combined to meet several objectives. They were selected, and in some cases adapted, in part because they embodied the forum's principles:

- Everyone has something to offer
- Connections make a difference
- Movement is good
- We all have a stake in making this a success

Many of the descriptions provided below have been drawn directly from the KS Toolkit Website – an ever-expanding community resource of knowledge sharing methods and tools.

Introductions: Who's in the room?

Description	An icebreaker often used at the opening of an event, which gives people a sense of who is in the room as well as the diversity among the participants. Prior to the event, prepare 3-5 statements that have categorical answers. For example, a statement could refer to one's origins. The categories of responses could include the continents, specific regions or countries depending on the diversity of participants. As the statements are read out loud, participants are invited to group themselves around the room according to their response to the statement.
When you would consider using it	- Useful for surfacing the diversity within a group - Group sizes that are greater than 20 participants
Tips	- If you are working with a large group, use a projector to post the statements and categories on a large screen - Write the categories on flipcharts or pieces of paper to help participants connect with others in the same category - Don't bother trying to interrupt the groups once they have formed. Let them chat for a few minutes before introducing the next statement
References	

Chat show: The regulatory and policy environment

Description	The chat show is a combination of a panel presentation and fishbowl formats. It is based around the concept of a **talk show** or **chat show** – a television or radio program where one person (or group of people) discuss various topics put forth by the show's host. As described by wikipedia, sometimes chat shows feature a panel of guests, usually consisting of a group of people who are learned or who have great experience in relation to whatever issue is being discussed on the show for that episode. Other times, a single guest discusses their work or area of expertise with a host or co-hosts.[5]

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chat_show

	Chat shows require minimal preparation on behalf of participants assuming that they are familiar with the content being discussed. What's needed for a chat show? - A chat show host (the livelier, the better!) - 3-4 guests - An audience
When you would consider using it	As outlined in the chat show methodology documentation, the chat show provides: - *An alternative to a keynote or formal podium presentation.* - *A chance to weave ideas between participants and dig down for key issues.* - *A way to draw out stories from people without them having to do a lot of preparation.*[6] You wouldn't use this method for building towards a consensus or conclusions.
Tips	- A minimum of an hour is needed to do the process justice, more if you're going to pull out insights and ideas (on a flip chart to help create a visual memory of the discussion) - Chat shows work best when the guests' stories relate to each other but still show different angles so the main homework prior to the show is in selecting a relevant theme and interesting guests. - It helps if the host and guests are lively and energetic – play acting works but discourage the host and guests from "playing dumb" - Ensure that the host takes some time prior to the show to get to know his/her guests. Suggest that they meet to discuss how they see the show unfold - Encourage hosts to facilitate the discussion not try to control or dominate. - Consider inviting the audience to ask questions - Leave time in the agenda to solicit key insights and ideas that emerged during the show. This could be done in small groups followed by a debrief in plenary. Have a flipchart writer on hand to capture the points on a flipchart to be documented as a workshop output.
References	- Chat show methodology documentation - KS Toolkit: Chat show

[6] http://www.kstoolkit.org/Chat+Shows

The World Café: Lowering the barriers for participation in the Information Society

Description	This description is based on the description outlined in Café To Go[7]. In a world café, people take part in progressive (usually 3) rounds of conversation of approx 20 – 30 mins. After each round, one person is invited to remain at the table while the others travel to a new table carrying key ideas or themes with them. By having people form new groups around key questions, ideas surface and patterns emerge which participants are asked to share in a plenary round. At the start of each conversation round, participants will be presented with a question. Paper table cloths are provided on which participants are invited to draw, doodle and capture key ideas and insights. A debrief in plenary invites participants to share any patterns or new insights that emerged for them
When you would consider using it	- For exchanging views, experiences, stories or project results - To generate new ideas and insights around a particular theme - When you have time. A minimum of 2 hrs is needed to explain the process, host three discussion rounds and debrief in plenary
Tips	- The most challenging aspect of the world café is in developing a set of powerful questions - Provide clear process guidelines. Along with the questions, these could be projected onto a screen and/or on printouts placed on the tables - If working in multiple language, use signage to identify the languages spoken at the tables and where interpretation is provided
References	- Café to Go: A quick reference guide - The World Café website

[7] http://www.theworldcafe.com/articles/cafetogo.pdf

The Great Debate: "Be it resolved that Africa's ICTs development challenges are best addressed by the private sector."

<table>
<tr><td>Description</td><td>As described by wikipedia, "a debate or debating is a formal method of interactive and representational argument."[8]

There are a variety of ways to approach the introduction and implementation of a debate in the context of an event.

For the ARLF, the following process was followed:

1. Spectrogram exercise (see below) to bring out the perspectives in the group. One of the statements should include the resolution under discussion during the debate.
2. Opening: The moderator introduces the resolution, its relevance and the process before introducing the debaters.
3. Debate:
    a. Opening statements (5 minutes each)
    b. Rebuttals (2 minutes each)
    c. Quiz questions: Fact or funny answers accepted (5 mins)
    d. Closing arguments (2 mins each)
4. Clapping for the winner
5. Repeat the spectrogram exercise using the resolution as the statement under considered

Following the debate, participants could also be invited to discuss the resolution at their tables. Guiding questions for the discussion could include:
- What are your views on the issue?
- What argument resonated most with you and why?

A brief debrief in plenary brings the session to a close.</td></tr>
<tr><td>When you would consider using it</td><td>To highlight perspectives on a current issue.

You wouldn't use this method for building towards a consensus or conclusions.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Tips</td><td>- Identify debaters who don't take themselves too seriously, are passionate about their position but open to hearing other points of view, and can work impromptu without having to follow a script
- Choose a moderator who is familiar with the topic and</td></tr>
</table>

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debate

	comfortable in front of large audiences - Gauge ahead of time how to best balance the seriousness of the topic under discussion with the desire to be informal and entertaining - If you decide to introduce the quiz questions during the debate, consider sharing some or all of the questions with the debaters ahead of time - If you incorporate the spectrogram methodology to open and close the debate, find out who has moved the furthest from their original position. Ask them why their position changed
References	- The CBC's show "The Debaters"

Spectrogram: Included as an introduction in the Great Debate but could also be used as a stand alone exercise

Description	As described on Aspiration's website: *"A group exercise which has proven quite effective at a range of events around the globe is the 'spectrogram'. In a spectrogram, colored tape is laid out across an open floor. Ideally the tape stretches 15-20 yards/meters. One end of the tape is marked as "Strongly Agree", and the opposite end is labeled as "Strongly Disagree". Cross-marks are made at the 25%, 50%, and 75% points along the line.* *Participants are then read a short, controversial or extreme statement. Those who agree with the statement are invited to move toward the "Strongly Agree" end of the line, positioning themselves closer to the end if their agreement is complete and towards the center if their agreement is mixed. Those who disagree with the statement are invited to do the same in the opposite direction.* *The facilitator then "interviews" people along the line, asking them why they are standing where they are. Passion is encouraged in describing positioning, and listeners are encouraged to shift their position on the spectrogram as points are made which alter their thinking and perspective on the question."*[9]
When you would	To bring out perspectives, not achieve consensus.

[9] http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php/Facilitation:Spectrogram

consider using it	
Tips	- With groups of 20+, use flipcharts to label the positions on the spectrogram. Tape isn't really needed.
References	- Aspiration's description of the spectrogram

Speed Rounds: Contributions of ICT4D research to development in Africa

Description	Speed Rounds, also known as Speed Geeking and Speed Dating is a large group method to quickly expose participants to a wealth of information. It could be related to a variety of topics from new technologies, projects, outcomes, theory etc. The focus is on short exposure to something new as presented by someone with deep, practical experience in the topic area, tool or method. For a description of the process, see the Speed Geeking entry on the KS Toolkit website.
When you would consider using it	*"Speed geeking can be used when there is limited time and there are many things to look at and discuss. The limited time (normally between 10 - 15 mins) keeps the presentations short, focused and to the point."*[10]
Tips	- Arrange to meet with the presenters ahead of time to help prepare them for the session. Invite them to do a speed round with each other. It gives them a sense of how quickly the time passes but also a chance to learn about each other's work (as they won't be able to participate during the session itself) - Let participants know that in between rounds, the room will likely get noisy and chaotic. Encourage them to quickly find a seat so that the next round can get started. - Make sure that there is enough spacing between the speed round stations so that presenters don't drown each other out - Consider the energy of a presenter who has to present repeatedly. You may want to limit the number of times that they present i.e. up to 5 which means that if there are more than stations than rounds, participants will need to choose which of the presentations they want to attend - Encourage presenters to use graphics or objects to support

[10] http://www.kstoolkit.org/Speed+geeking

	their presentations. A flipchart with the title of the presentation helps inform participants what's being presented
References	- Speed Geeking entry on the KS Toolkit website.

Fishbowl: The implications of networked societies

Description	A fishbowl process provides a creative way to include participants in a panel like discussion. *"Fishbowls involve a small group of people (up to 4 suggested) seated in circle, having a conversation in full view of a larger group of listeners. One or more chairs are open to "visitors" (i.e., members of the audience) who want to ask questions or make comments. Although largely self-organizing once the discussion gets underway, the fishbowl process usually has a facilitator or moderator. The fishbowl is almost always part of a larger process of dialogue and deliberation."*[11] For a more detailed description of the method, refer to the Fish Bowl entry outlined in the KS Toolkit website.
When you would consider using it	As suggested in the Effective Engagement Toolkit, the uses/strengths of the method include: - *"Highly applicable when consultation (and/or interaction) with the broader community is required* - *Can be used to build trust with the community by creating a sense of transparency in decision making* - *Can illuminate decisions through focused and creative dialogue"*[12]
Tips	- Choose fishbowl guests i.e. those who jumpstart the discussion, who can work without a script and are willing to let content emerge rather than trying to control the flow of ideas. - Fishbowl guests sometimes feel they need to 'present' their work rather than talk to it. Meet the guests ahead of time to discuss how the session will unfold and remind guests that the session is intended to promote conversation rather than information dissemination

[11] http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bowl
[12] http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/wcmn203.nsf/LinkView/A6EA88449B246311CA25708100208CDACBCEB7EC76E11811CA257091000C611A

References	- Fish Bowl entry on the KS Toolkit website - Effective Engagement Toolkit - OS Fishbowl

Open Space: Stimulating equality across networked societies

Description	The Open Space process is described in a number of languages at the Open Space World site. Briefly, it is a method for convening groups around a specific question or task of importance and giving them responsibility for creating both their own agenda and experience. Generally, newbies to open space perceive the method as lacking any kind of structure. However, it is in just the opposite. Open space is about structure but one that truly fits how people do their best work – bounded by passion and responsibility.
When you would consider using it	As outlined in the Open Space World website, OS works best when: - *"The work is complex* - *At least a half to two full days are available* - *The people and ideas involved are diverse* - *The passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high* - *The time to get the work done was yesterday* It can be used for: - *Problem solving: Bringing stakeholders together to understand a problem and seek a shared solution.* - *Strategic planning: Identifying goals and actions.* - *Sharing and synthesizing knowledge: Reflecting on what has been learned and understanding how it applies to work going forward.* - *Community, team and network building: Working together in small and large groups to help build relationships"*[13]
Tips	If you are keen to run an OS event or session in open space, consider the following: - Read Harrison Owen's book "*Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*" which can be ordered from most popular bookstores - Join the OS community's listserve or ning space

[13] http://www.openspaceworld.org

	- Check out the resources at Opening Space a website hosted by Lisa Heft - Sign up to one of many OS trainings offered around the world
References	See “Tips” (above)

Tools: The use of social media

Social media offers plenty of opportunities to connect participants before, during and after an event and co-create real-time documentation which could be shared beyond its physical walls.

Building an Online Presence: The decision to create an online presence for the ARLF wasn’t nearly as difficult as the choice of platform.

There were several criteria that were determined early on – the main one being a bilingual platform to ensure the inclusion of both English and French speaking participants. The Acacia team also concluded that the platform should offer the following functionality:

- Participants’ profiles
- Blogs
- Tweeting
- A repository for forum documents i.e. text, audio and video

After a thorough investigation of several platforms including Ning and Crowdvine, the open source and social publishing platform Elgg was selected. Countless of hours were spent preparing the site for launch – having dedicated resources were critical to its success.

The online presence proved to be a great way to connect participants prior to the forum. As outlined in the forum’s evaluation report:

> *“Of all the Forum delegates, 66% of respondents joined the online social networking space (www.acaciaforum.net) and found it useful for many reasons. Respondents explained that this interactive platform helped them to make contact with other participants before the Forum and to learn about other members’ interests and research activities. Also, it enabled them to register for several events and to follow the Forum program activities. The participants also appreciated the visual aspect of the online space.”*

Social reporting: In the early planning stages, it was decided that the Forum would invest in a social reporting process. As coined by David Wilcox, social reporting is defined as…

> *… "an emerging role, a set of skills, and a philosophy around how to mix journalism, facilitation and social media to help people develop conversations and stories for collaboration.*
>
> *While mainstream reporting is usually about capturing surprise, conflict, crisis, and entertainment, and in projecting or broadcasting stories to audiences, social reporters aim to work collaboratively with other people, producing words, pictures and movies together. They may challenge and even provoke, but social reporters are sensitive to the resources and parameters of the group, community or organisation they reporting for. They are insiders rather than outsiders."*[14]

Led by The Africa Commons Project (TACP), the social reporting process brought together a team of dedicated journalists from across more than 5 countries to collaboratively create the story behind the forum. It was a project in and of itself.

If you are considering incorporating social reporting in an event, the following tips, as suggested in the Social Reporting Toolbox, provide great advice:

- *Leave enough time to plan and set up systems … ideally three months for a big event.*
- *Decide if one person will have responsibility for "editorial" management of content throughout the preparation, the event, and follow through or if each person will do their own editing.*
- *One person needs to be part of the event design team, or to work very closely with them. They need to be familiar with the topics and content to be covered.*
- *Organise technical support. The "editor" will need this for setting up and running systems, unless they have these skills.*
- *Ensure that you have administrative-level control of the online systems that you use - rather than having to constantly ask for changes or upgrade. A conventional event website is very unlikely to offer the social reporting functions you need, and a technical team running it may not be able easily to add those. Be prepared to set up a separate blog or wiki linked to the main site.*
- *In any social networking, lead by example. Get the organising team online "modeling" the type of interactions that you hope to see. Then try and get speakers to contribute.*
- *Work closely with someone who has insider knowledge of the event organisers and participants.*

For more information on how to incorporate social reporting into an event, download Bev Traynor and David Wilcox's the Social Reporting Toolbox.

[14] Social Reporting Toolbox (p. 5)

Planning a bilingual event

One advantage in hosting a more conventional conference i.e. one that is dominated by talking heads and plenary formats is the ease of working in more than one language. Hired interpretation services allow participants to follow what's being presented on a headset and often through their slides.

Hosting a more unconventional event, like the ARLF, in more than one language creates a new set of challenges since the approaches rely on conversations not presentations. Hiring enough interpreters to cover small group discussions is unrealistic. Besides, there are better approaches to support cross-language communications and help create a more inclusive event.

When organising a multilingual event, the following process suggestions are offered:

- Ensure that the facilitators can at least cover, if not communicate, in all of the event's working languages
- Build a working relationship with the interpreters. Arrange a meeting, preferably face-to-face, to discuss their terms of reference ensuring that they understand how the event's design may require them to work in ways that they aren't used to i.e. out of the interpretation box. Agree on how you can best support participants so that they can effectively communicate with each other across the language divide. This may require that the interpreters, at times, provide whisper or small group translation to one or more participants in addition to 'regular' translation when in plenary
- At the start of the event, acknowledge its working languages and highlight the opportunities they bring with them i.e. diversity of opinions, ideas and experiences etc.
- Acknowledge the interpretation resources available from within the group. Using the icebreaker "Who's in the Room", have participants group themselves according to the languages in which they can work. Invite bilingual or multilingual participants to offer support if they see a need
- For smaller group discussions, create bilingual or multilingual tables and ask an interpreter to join a table as needed
- Encourage participants to contribute to plenary sessions in any of the forum's working languages
- Post any materials display on the walls in the event's working languages
- If running an open space, consider opening it in more than one language
- Check in regularly with participants and interpreters to see what's working and what should be done differently to support translation needs

Reflections on event implementation

Looking back on the ARLF, it is difficult to say how the event could have been better implemented. I would always promote more open space but for this particular event, in which certain work needed to get done, it was challenging enough to have agreement on a full day in open space.

A few insights are offered on what made the implementation work and what could have been better.

What made the event implementation work?

- There was some **flexibility in the design**. We went in with a clear plan and structure but allowed for surprises. For example, on the afternoon of day three, during the session in Open Space, it was expected that a handful of participants would identify topics they wanted to move forward. We ended up with more than 20 and had to modify the process to accommodate the must higher than expected levels of interest.
- The **dedication and commitment of the Acacia team**. Forums like the ARLF, provide a great opportunity to network and to work face-to-face with partners. Acacia staff worked around the clock assuming responsibilities as session co-leads, which for some meant working well into the evening planning sessions with those involved, and squeezing in meetings with partners. Team members managed to create the time for both. A more traditional approach to event design would have freed up some of their time but it would have likely also resulted in a less engaging event with meetings scheduled during plenary presentations.
- While it isn't clear to what extent the **daily team reflections** contributed to the event's outcome, there was a sense that the opportunity to discuss as a team how the day unfolded was appreciated. These sessions enabled us to quickly identify things that needed to be done differently the following day. As the outcomes of the sessions didn't have much of an impact on each other, the changes had more to do with logistics i.e. temperature control, sounds system etc. than changes to the design of the agenda. The quick tour du tables, however, provided members of the team a space to share their views, ideas and reactions and identify specific areas of improvement – both immediate and long term.

What could have been better?

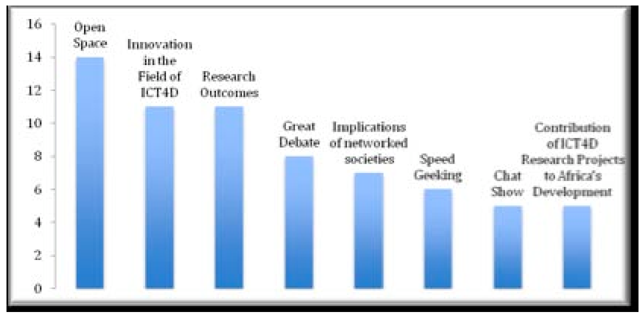
- Finding ways to help participants in the chat show and fishbowl formats to engage in a conversation rather than feeling a need to present their work
- Setting expectations in a way that participants would have been prepared for a healthy dose of chaos and surprise. While the invitation often creates the expectations perhaps other approaches such as engaging in conversations with as many participants as possible prior to the event should have been considered

One final observation relates to the amount of time invested into the design of the sessions. The session most liked by participants – the open space – took the least amount of time to design. In fact, it was minimal compared to the efforts that went into the other sessions especially those implicating participants and/or external guests.

Event Outcomes

During but most often at the end of an event, there are always a handful of participants who approach me to share their thoughts and reflections on the event's methods. In the case of the ARLF, the situation wasn't much different.

During the event, in addition to receiving positive feedback about how the days unfolded, a few participants who I knew to be frequent conference attendees and facilitators themselves approached me to offer suggestions on ways to improve a session that they felt could have been better. It wasn't surprising to me that the sessions on which suggestions were being offered were different from each other and that the advice given was diverse. This supports a personal belief, based on experience alone, that methods are personal and that no one method will ever be able to please all.



The results of the evaluation are supportive of that belief. When asked which session participants liked the most, the responses ranged (see chart). In addition, while the majority liked the open space session the best, there were a couple of participants who were quite critical about the approach.

Following an event, there are often a handful of participants who approach me expressing various levels of appreciation for being part of an event that kept them engaged never mind awake – a meeting experience which is evidently new to them. The ARLF experience was no different and the evaluation results validate this outcome. When asked what participants liked most about the Forum, the majority responded that it was the facilitation techniques and approach taken in organising the event. Comments included:

- *"Everyone had the opportunity to let their voices be heard…"*
- *"…novel approaches for generating ideas, keeping participants involved, and (having) dedicated documenters"*
- "*l'approche pédagogique utilisée qui a permis à différents réseaux d'échanges des idées et des expériences a permis de réfléchir au plus important, la création de réseaux*

While some are interested in simply expressing their appreciation, others go further asking where they can learn more about the methods. I keenly direct them to the many resources that exist, especially around large-scale methods such as open space and appreciative inquiry, and the communities of practitioners built around them.

What I often don't highlight but perhaps should, are my operating principles around which I try to base all of my facilitation work:

- Everyone has a contribution to make

- Ensure accessibility and supporting diversity
- Including the whole system
- Learning can be facilitated
- Interaction and networking is central
- Participants should drive the agenda and feel responsible for the outcomes

Finally, at every event, there is always at least one participant who approaches me to ask if I am happy with the event's outcomes. I assume that, in part, they want to know whether or not I deem the event a success. In the case of the ARLF, there were a handful – none of whom seemed satisfied when I told them that my happiness with respect to the outcomes wasn't nearly as relevant as theirs since they had lived the experience, not me.

About the author

Allison Hewlitt works with partners and clients to design, facilitate and learn from creative and effective approaches to strategic planning, communications, documentation, curriculum delivery and team and network strengthening. Common across the approaches are the promotion of social equality and the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

As an independent consultant working primarily in the field of international development, Allison has over 10 years' experience in supporting a range of organisations including NGOs, research institutions, donor agencies, multilateral, governments and networks. She has worked in more than 30 countries worldwide.

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